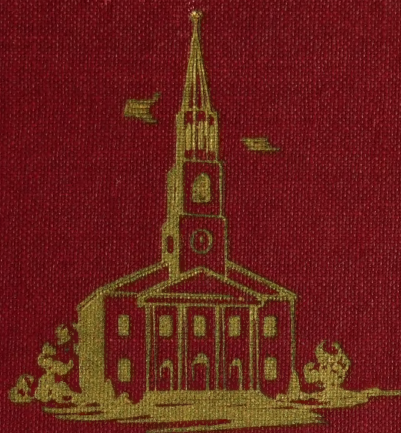


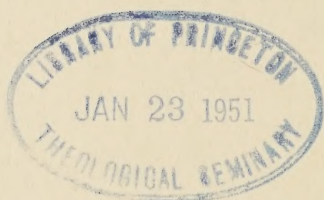


The Churches and the Social Conscience

O. T. BINKLEY

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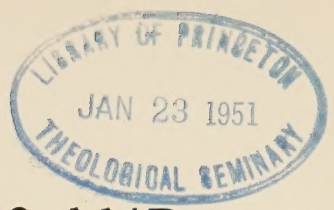
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The churches and the social
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THE CHURCHES AND
THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

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THE CHURCHES AND THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

By

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Preface

RELIGION, as a way of life, is the most profound influence in human experience. It imbues plain men with greatness. It endows great men with courage and purpose. And through men's lives the power of the spirit becomes for the nation a foundation and a force for progress.

In the development and preservation of the basic institutions of a free and liberty-loving America, the spiritual power of religion has always played a fundamental part. Free to worship after the dictates of their own consciences, men have woven into the fabric of the republic the dignity and honor of righteousness. The influence of religion in developing the American polity is measured by this series.

The National Foundation for Education in American Citizenship has arranged the Fundamental American Principles Series on Religion to portray for every citizen the contributions of religion to our way of life. Each essay is written by a distinguished authority. The Foundation is a nonpartisan, nonsectarian public trust, and views expressed, as in each of its publications, are those of the author and are not to be interpreted necessarily as views of the Foundation's board or officers.

Topics in the series indicate the breadth and depth of religious influences:

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Editors of the series are Frank J. Klingberg, Professor of History, University of California, Los Angeles, and Franklin L. Burdette, Professor of Government and Politics, University of Maryland.

These authoritative summaries show vividly the fundamental relationship between religious faith and basic American principles. The historic role of the churches, the American churches in action, and the role of a nation imbued on the whole with Christian religious standards are treated with understanding and vision.

—SAMUEL R. HARRELL

Chairman, Board of Trustees
National Foundation for Education
In American Citizenship

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THE CHURCHES AND THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

The Churches and the Social Conscience

INTRODUCTION

THE INFLUENCE of the churches in social thought and action is a major aspect of the religious history of the United States. The churches have been a powerful factor in shaping the ideals of our national life. They have emphasized moral principles, influenced the social structure, and inspired social reform. They have awakened in many of their members "a passion for righteousness, and for the spread of righteousness, conceived as a cosmic demand."¹

Religion is more than a cultural reflex. It is a powerful social force. Religion affects society in two major ways. (1) It functions as a means of social control.² It imparts religious sanctions to standards of conduct and protects

¹ William Ernest Hocking, *Living Religions and a World Faith* (New York, 1940), p. 26.

² Paul Henry Landis, *Social Control: Social Organization and Disorganization in Process* (New York, 1939), p. 237.

the mores. In this way organized religion conserves values inherited from the past and resists radical social reconstruction. (2) Religion is a significant factor in social change. It inspires social reform and affects economic and political trends. It produces prophetic personalities, men and women of ethical insight and good will, who disturb the mores. These persons undertake to relate ethical principles and convictions to the vital issues of contemporary life. They sensitize the social conscience and keep the flame of social altruism burning bright.

There is in the Christian religion a revolutionary strain which "demands rebirth rather than conservation" and "pronounces moral judgment rather than divine protection."³ This impulse to social reform has been strong in American Protestantism, especially in the denominations which arose out of the radical wing of Protestantism. American Christians have laid great stress upon the conversion of the individual and private religious devotion, but they have also struggled against the collective ills of mankind and supported humanitarian enterprises.

³ Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Chicago, 1937), p. 11.

Religion as organized in the life of the churches has sharpened the social conscience in American life and culture. From the beginning the churches in the United States have implemented the desire to "promote the general welfare."⁴ Many of the first settlers were essentially religious persons and in the early days the church was the center of the community. New England was founded as an experiment in Christian living and in the town meetings church people participated in the discussions of social issues, took an active part in the care of the poor and needy, and stood for justice and human welfare. They recognized the sovereignty of God and believed that he has a purpose for the organized life of his people.

I

IN THE eighteenth century organized religion began to reach the masses of the people in the American colonies through revivals which are known as the Great Awakening. This religious movement strengthened the practical influence of Christianity upon colonial society.⁵

⁴ Preamble, *Constitution of the United States*.

⁵ William Warren Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1942), p. 311.

One of the by-products of the Great Awakening was a new social consciousness and a growing awareness that devotion to Christ must show itself in deeds of kindness and active good will to men. Jonathan Edwards, the greatest theologian of the movement, taught that the foundation of virtue is "disinterested benevolence."⁶ He said that this is an ethical ideal which natural man cannot reach until the grace of God changes his corrupt nature. The notion of disinterested benevolence modified and strengthened the motivation of good deeds. Works of charity do not save individuals, but loyalty to the God of love, and the motivation which comes from spiritual union with him, are expressed in deeds of kindness to men. This doctrine was interpreted in practical terms by Samuel Hopkins and became a powerful driving force in American humanitarianism. As Dr. Sweet has pointed out, "Here was forged the framework of the first anti-slavery impulse in America, and Samuel Hopkins, student of Jonathan Edwards, was its father. The New Light Presbyterians and the Baptists, as they expanded southward, became open opponents of slavery, and the growing Methodist movement, stressing the in-

⁶ Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York, 1940), p. 308.

finite love and pity of God, added its influence to the new humanitarianism."⁷

The Great Awakening stimulated the humanitarian impulse in the Middle Colonies as well as in New England. The evangelical preachers reminded their hearers that there is a connection between Christian experience and right living. The sympathies of the people were deeply stirred and they were awakened to a new interest in the orphan, the Indian, the Negro, and the unfortunate.⁸

Democratic and humanitarian influences came out of the Great Awakening in Virginia. The Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians opened the doors of their churches to the slaves and took an interest in their welfare. The movement was a revival of personal religion, but from it sprang educational and humanitarian influences which made for the betterment of society.⁹

One evidence of the influence of the churches upon social thought and action in the United States in the eighteenth century may be seen in the sermons of the

⁷ Sweet, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-18. Reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

⁸ Charles Hartshorn Maxson, *The Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Chicago, 1920), p. 148.

⁹ Wesley Marsh Gewehr, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790* (Durham, 1930), p. 262.

ministers of the Congregational churches in New England. A large number of these were published and have been preserved. Professor Alice M. Baldwin has made a thorough study of the sermons which were preached on the annual election day in the New England colonies. This study, published under the title, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*, shows that for over one hundred years the ministers of New England had been preaching the sovereignty of God, the reality of the moral law, and the natural rights of men which are essentially the same as the principles of the Declaration of Independence. These ministers were convinced that civil liberty and religious liberty were tied together. They also cherished the right to life, liberty, and property. In fact, there "is not a right asserted in the Declaration of Independence which had not been discussed by the New England clergy before 1763."¹⁰

II

THE CLOSING YEARS of the eighteenth century were characterized by hostility and indifference to Christianity in the United States. The Revolutionary War

¹⁰ Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (Durham, 1928), p. 170.

had increased crime and immorality. The teachings of Hume and Paine had exalted natural impulses. College students renounced the restrictions of Christian morality and boasted of their skepticism.

There was, however, at the beginning of the nineteenth century a revival movement called the Evangelical Awakening. It resulted in an enormous increase in church membership, in the rise of the Sunday School movement in this country, and in the founding of Christian colleges and seminaries.

The ethical idealism of the Evangelical Awakening found expression in the support given by church people to benevolent societies and to the crusades which were directed toward the correction of specific evils. It was an era of missionary interest and activity. It was also an era of permeation in which Christian ideals were brought to bear more effectively upon the ills and evils of American society.

Institutions for the care of the blind, the deaf, the insane, and the unfortunate sprang up all over the country, many of them founded by men and women who had received their ethical incentive in the fellowship of the church. The churches inspired men and women to participate in a succession of movements for human relief

and liberation. "Every humanitarian cause—temperance, peace, prison reform, the amelioration of poverty—became the rallying point of ardent souls who had been kindled by the gospel of the kingdom of Christ."¹¹ Preachers took a stand against social evils. For example, the killing of Alexander Hamilton by Aaron Burr in a duel in 1804 stirred the ministers to condemn duelling and to speak out positively in favor of settling disputes by law and Christian morality.¹² Eliphalet Nott, a Presbyterian clergyman and educator, preached a sermon entitled, "A Discourse . . . Occasioned by the Ever to be Lamented Death of General Alexander Hamilton."¹³ This sermon was preached at the invitation of the Common Council of Albany. It was later published and circulated widely over the nation.

The churches, and leaders inspired by the churches, initiated and supported social reforms in the United States in the nineteenth century. There were crusades against gambling and prostitution and war, efforts to

¹¹ Niebuhr, *op. cit.*, p. 123. Reprinted by permission of Willett, Clark and Company.

¹² Roland Herbert Bainton, *The Church of Our Fathers* (New York, 1941), p. 239.

¹³ *Dictionary of American Biography*, XIII (New York, 21 Vols., 1928-1937), p. 580.

secure more intelligent and humane treatment of prisoners and of the insane, and attempts to achieve greater opportunities for women and a more adequate social order. The anti-slavery impulse, the temperance movement, and the large amounts of money given for philanthropy are strong evidences of the social idealism and moral vitality of American Christianity during this period.

1. The churches stirred up the conscience of the nation against slavery. In the eighteenth century influential religious leaders had protested against the inhumanity of slavery. John Woolman advised Friends who owned slaves to free them and to make provision for their education and economic welfare. John Wesley condemned the slave trade. John Asplund, a Baptist leader, declared that slavery is "contrary to the doctrine of our Master Jesus." In 1790 he wrote a treatise on practical religion in which he listed practices inconsistent with Christian faith and conduct. He put at the head of the list, "Keeping our fellow-creatures in bondage, who have as good a right as we, both to civil and religious liberty—Not only so; but misusing them, concerning common blessings, which certainly is a violation of the

rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government.”¹⁴

The conviction that slavery is morally wrong came out of Christian thought and strengthened the abolition movement in the United States. For example, Charles G. Finney, a frontier preacher and teacher, exerted a powerful influence upon the anti-slavery sentiment. Jonathan Edwards had taught that disinterested benevolence is an attribute of God. Finney took this teaching and made a practical application of it, declaring that God is a God of good will and that he expects his children to engage in disinterested benevolence. He applied this teaching in the field of social reform and, under the influence of Theodore Weld, interpreted it to mean the abolition of slavery.¹⁵ Weld and Finney convinced students at the Lane Seminary in Cincinnati and at Oberlin College that slavery is a serious social sin and should be eliminated. In 1835 these students, inspired and directed by Weld and Finney, “precipitated

¹⁴ John Asplund, *The Annual Register of the Baptist Denomination in North America, to the First of November, 1790* (Norfolk, 3rd Edition, 1791), pp. 56-57.

¹⁵ Arthur Cushman McGiffert, Jr., “Charles Grandison Finney,” *Christendom*, VII (Autumn 1942), pp. 496-506.

another Great Revival in the nation, a revival in abolitionism."¹⁶

The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 made the cultivation of cotton profitable in the southern states and by 1830 slavery was considered a sacred institution in the South. The churches in the southern regions of the United States tried to protect slavery by the sanction of religion. Preachers and editors of religious papers quoted the Bible in defense of slavery. In October and November of 1844 Thomas Meredith published a series of editorials in *The Biblical Recorder* in which he undertook to prove that "slaveholding is expressly recognized by apostolic authority as compatible with justice and equity,"¹⁷ that slaveholding is "no disqualification for the Christian ministry,"¹⁸ "that slaveholding is strictly compatible with the moral precepts of the bible,"¹⁹ that slaveholding is "no justifiable cause of dissention in the christian church,"²⁰ and "that proscriptive abolitionists are unworthy of christian fellowship."²¹

¹⁶ Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York, 1933), p. 78.

¹⁷ *The Biblical Recorder*, October 5, 1844.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October 12, 1844.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, October 19, 1844.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, October 26, 1844.

²¹ *Ibid.*, November 2, 1844.

It should be noted, however, that while southern churches sought to justify slavery, the Christian impulse kept alive in many church members a respect for persons of both races and a desire to minister to human need and to relieve human suffering. Some members of the churches took an interest in the spiritual welfare of the slaves and provided religious instruction for them. One of the first actions taken by the Southern Baptist Convention was the adoption of a report of the Committee on the Instruction of the Colored Population. The report stated that, "The committee on the subject of the instruction of colored persons are happy to learn, from their own observation and other sources of information, that this department of christian labor has been growing in interest and in efficiency. . . . In many churches, pains is [*sic*] taken to instruct them in the principles of christian discipline, and colored deacons appointed to exercise an oversight over the moral character of the colored members. . . ."²²

2. The churches in the United States have taught that drunkenness is a violation of Christian morality and that the liquor traffic is inimical to the welfare of the state.

²² *Proceedings of the First Triennial Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention*, 1846, p. 16.

There are three phases of the warfare waged by church people against the manufacture, sale, and use of alcoholic beverages.

The first strategy used by the churches in the fight against liquor was a plea for voluntary abstinence. At the close of the colonial period, the drinking of liquor was common even among church people. In the years following the Revolutionary War, however, there arose a strong tide of temperance sentiment. The movement enlisted the interest of the churches. Preachers at first spoke against the excessive use of distilled liquors and a little later many of them urged the adoption of the principle of total abstinence. Before 1800 all the religious denominations in North Carolina took action against drunkenness.²³ The Quakers participated in the temperance movement, bore a steady official testimony against the evils of alcoholic intemperance, and between 1825 and 1850 most of the Friends in America discontinued the use of alcoholic beverages on their tables and on social occasions.²⁴ The American Society for the Promotion of Temperance was organized in Boston in

²³ Guion Griffis Johnson, *Anti-Bellum North Carolina* (Chapel Hill, 1937), p. 454.

²⁴ Elbert Russell, *The History of Quakerism* (New York, 1942), pp. 396-97.

1826. It was founded largely by clergymen and it pledged its members to abstinence from strong spirits.²⁵ The pleas of the preachers and Christian physicians for pledges to total abstinence and the disciplines used by the churches did not solve the liquor problem, but they strengthened the temperance crusade.

The second phase of the crusade against alcohol was the attempt to prohibit the manufacture and use of liquor by state and federal legislation. After the Civil War the liquor traffic increased enormously and the liquor problem became a major interest of most of the churches. Two organizations, drawing their leadership and much of their financial support from the churches, were primarily responsible for obtaining local, state, and national prohibition. They were the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and the Anti-Saloon League. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union arose in 1873. Its most famous leader was Frances E. Willard. It was a powerful moral crusade and soon became national in scope. The Anti-Saloon League which described itself as "the church in action against the saloon," and which enlisted support from members of all churches, became

²⁵ Ernest Hurst Cherrington, editor-in-chief, *Standard Encyclopedia of the Alcohol Problem*, I (Westerville, Ohio, 6 vols., 1925-1930), p. 157.

an effective agency for securing state and national prohibition.²⁶ By 1916 nineteen states had forbidden the sale of liquor and twenty-six others had local option.²⁷ In 1919 the prohibition amendment was ratified and it went into effect on January 16, 1920. This achievement was due primarily to the Christian conscience. According to Dr. K. S. Latourette, "It was primarily the Christian, and especially the Protestant forces of the country which had brought about this consummation."²⁸

It is true that many professing Christians were indifferent to the prohibition movement. Some church people opposed it. On the whole the Episcopal Church, which had remained officially neutral throughout the anti-slavery conflict, was opposed to the prohibition movement. However, when the eighteenth amendment became the law of the land, most of the leaders of the Episcopal Church took the view that good citizens should observe it and the General Convention expressed disapproval of its violation.²⁹

The third aspect of the struggle of the churches with

²⁶ Luther A. Weigle, *American Idealism* (New Haven, 1928), p. 210.

²⁷ Cherrington, *op. cit.*, IV, p. 1586.

²⁸ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Great Century* (New York, 1941), p. 396.

²⁹ William Wilson Manross, "The Episcopal Church and Reform," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, XII (December 1943), pp. 353-57.

the liquor problem is an attempt to arouse public opinion by a program of education. The educational method was used also in the earlier stages of the temperance movement, but there is a greater emphasis upon the educational approach to the problem today. The repeal of the eighteenth amendment in 1933 convinced church leaders that the evil of alcoholic intemperance cannot be cured by legislative action alone. Legislation must wait upon education, popular conviction, and reflective commitment. Consequently, churches are at present encouraging their members to learn the facts concerning the nature and the personal and social consequences of the consumption of alcohol. This strategy requires time, but the Christian conscience has not accepted the liquor business as a permanent part of our civilization.

3. The vast amount of money given for humanitarian enterprises in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is another evidence of the moral imperative in American Christianity. The churches have put on the Christian conscience an awareness of the immense worth of human life and the obligation to measure goods in terms of service. They have approved hard work, self-realization, and open-hearted generosity. They have asked their members to give liberally to good causes and to have the

spirit of active good will which has become a distinctive feature in our national life. In 1921 George Santayana wrote, "If it were given me to look into the depths of a man's heart, and I did not find goodwill at the bottom, I should say without any hesitation, You are not an American."³⁰

The motives of philanthropy have doubtless been mixed. Some of the money has been given to churches and other institutions to ease a guilty conscience, to compensate for a lack of social insight, or to gain exemption under income and inheritance tax laws. However, a substantial proportion of American benevolence has been due to the quickening of conscience and the strengthening of the altruistic impulse by the spirit of Jesus. After a careful study of American charities, A. G. Warner said, "It was right that the state should undertake relief work, but that relief work, and the great access of sympathy for our fellow-men which compelled it, would never have existed except for the influence of the church." Then he added: "At the present time, it is still the church that is the most powerful agent in inducing people to give."³¹

³⁰ George Santayana, *Character and Opinion in the United States* (New York, 1921), p. 171. Reprinted by permission of Charles Scribner's Sons.

³¹ Amos G. Warner, *American Charities* (New York, 1894), pp. 11, 316.

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Many of the large benefactions to higher education, to scientific research, and especially to medical science have been made by men and women who were actuated by Christian motives. Equally impressive are the gifts of the poor to the churches for the support of educational, benevolent, and missionary work. There are no annual reports of the total income and expenditures of all the churches in the United States. The Department of Commerce, however, compiles estimates of total gifts and bequests to religion in the United States. The totals reported by that Department for recent years are as follows:³²

1929	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$934,700,000
1931	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$762,600,000
1933	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$542,400,000
1935	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$574,000,000
1937	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$625,300,000
1939	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$593,200,000
1940	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$626,700,000
1941	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$674,100,000
1942	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	.	\$720,800,000

The total consumption expenditures made by religious

³² *Survey of Current Business*, United States Department of Commerce, June 1944.

bodies and private social welfare increased from \$996-600,000 in 1935 to \$1,278,300,000 in 1942.³³ The United Stewardship Council reports that 21 Protestant denominations in the United States contributed \$653,684,500 to local church expenses and benevolence in 1947. It should be noted that members of religious bodies constitute only about one-half of the population, that we do not have a state church and Christian giving is voluntary, and that many of the cash contributions to the churches are made by persons who have small incomes. The following statement made by Dr. Elbert Russell concerning the Quakers might also be made concerning all the major religious groups in the United States: "In addition to the relatively few wealthy Quaker philanthropists in America who have endowed educational and other philanthropic institutions, there have been thousands of Friends who have given relatively small sums and left small legacies for such purposes . . . the aggregate good accomplished by means of them being impossible to record."³⁴

The churches and individuals inspired by the churches

³³ J. Frederic Dewhurst and Associates, *America's Needs and Resources* (New York, 1947), p. 713.

³⁴ Russell, *op. cit.*, p. 477. Copyright 1942 by The Macmillan Company and reprinted with permission.

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have given generously for social reform, for Negro education, for colleges and seminaries, for orphanages, and for missionary work at home and abroad. They have participated in the American benevolence which has become world wide in scope. The Y.M.C.A., the Y.W.C.A., and the Salvation Army have been supported largely by Christian giving. Under the direction of Herbert Hoover \$357,000,000 provided by American gifts was disbursed for food and clothing in Belgium, France, Central Europe, Russia, and the Near East between 1914 and 1924.³⁵ Since 1881 the American Red Cross has expended \$165,000,000 for disaster relief at home and abroad. Of the total missionary outreach of the Protestant churches at the outbreak of World War II, one-half was sponsored from the United States. Of the total gifts to "orphaned missions" from the outbreak of the war to November 30, 1942, all but \$266,000 of the \$2,202,000 originated in the United States.³⁶ Since World War II the Protestant churches in the United States have raised \$100,000,000 for relief and reconstruction in Asia and Europe. Through Church World Service and its antecedent uniting agencies the churches have

³⁵ *Dictionary of American History*, IV (New York, 5 Vols., 1940), p. 261.

³⁶ Henry Pitney Van Dusen, *What Is the Church Doing?* (New York, 1943), pp. 61-62.

sent for relief overseas since 1940 about \$45,000,000 in cash and supplies.³⁷

III

THE DECADES which followed the Civil War witnessed the growth of social insight and a deepening sense of social responsibility on the part of a minority group of Christians in the United States. The crusades led and supported by church people in the first half of the nineteenth century had been directed against specific social evils. The "social gospel" movement which arose in American Protestantism between 1865 and 1890 proposed the reconstruction of society to bring it into harmony with the moral ideals of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. This minority movement in the churches was the recovery of a social emphasis in early Christianity and was influenced by the problems of industrialized society in Great Britain and in the United States. It was motivated by a strong conviction that the moral insights of Jesus should be made socially effective in the family, in the community, and in the economic order.

³⁷ Estimate furnished by Church World Service, Inc., 214 East 21st Street, New York 10, N. Y.

The social forces, the dynamic personalities, and the dominant ideas of the social gospel movement have been described by James Dombrowski in *The Early Days of Christian Socialism in America* and by Charles Howard Hopkins in a thorough and comprehensive study, published under the title, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915*.

The crux of the social gospel movement was the impact of the industrial revolution upon Christian thought in America.³⁸ The social situation in post-Civil War America was characterized by the rise of large scale production units, hastily built cities, and an increasing stream of immigration. There was an enormous growth of wealth in this country and the economic gains were unevenly distributed. A few became immensely wealthy and millions of workers in crowded cities and mining towns remained pitifully poor. Several ministers and laymen whose consciences had been sensitized and informed by the Christian ethic became concerned about the problems which the machine had brought.

A number of Unitarian, Congregationalist, and Episcopalian ministers began to speak out against political

³⁸ Charles Howard Hopkins, *The Rise of the Social Gospel in American Protestantism, 1865-1915* (New Haven, 1940), pp. 318-19.

corruption and social injustices. A little later pastors and teachers identified with Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and other religious bodies emphasized the social aspects of Christianity and sharpened Christian consciences with regard to social sin, especially in industry and in politics. Social settlements and institutional churches were established under the inspiration of Christian faith to minister to the physical and moral needs of the underprivileged in the slum areas of great urban centers. In 1906 Dr. Charles R. Brown told theological students that the church seeks "to quicken and strengthen human sympathy with want and pain, but it must seek still more to deepen also the sense of equity and justice which shall serve over wide areas to decrease the occasion for such charitable efforts."³⁹ Seminaries decided to teach young ministers to be sensitive to the needs of their people, to study the problems of their communities, and to see the relation of the church to the social forces and the economic trends of the times. Walter Rauschenbusch, for example, taught his students to work and to pray for the social awakening. According to D. R. Sharpe, "Rauschenbusch did in the field

³⁹ Charles Reynolds Brown, *The Social Message of the Modern Pulpit* (New York, 1912), p. 290.

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of social consciousness what Lincoln did in the field of statecraft—he introduced a new element, that of compassion for the common people.”⁴⁰ Far more than this, he insisted that social justice be defined in Christian terms; and he rooted a demand for economic justice and the claims of humanity in the essential relation of men to God and of Christians to their Lord.

A sense of social responsibility among the leaders of the churches inspired the organization in 1908 of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. From the beginning the Federal Council acted upon the presupposition that Jesus Christ is final authority in the social as in the individual life.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, representatives of the churches stated their social ideals, appointed committees on social service, and made pronouncements on social issues. In 1912 the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, representing the majority of Protestant churches, adopted a “Social Creed.” It asked for equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life, for the abolition of child labor, for the regulation of the conditions of

⁴⁰ Does Robinson Sharpe, *Walter Rauschenbusch* (New York, 1942), p. 447. Copyright 1942 by The Macmillan Company and used with permission.

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toil for women, for the suppression of the "Sweating System," for the gradual and reasonable reduction of the hours of labor, for a release from employment one day in seven, for the right of all men to the opportunity for self-maintenance, for the right of workers to some protection against the crises of industrial change, for a living wage as a minimum and the highest wage that each industry can afford, for the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery and occupational disease, for suitable provision for the old age of the workers and for those incapacitated by injury, for the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions, for the abatement of poverty, and for the most equitable division of the products of industry that can ultimately be devised.⁴¹ This document as revised in 1932 is significant as an expression of the social conscience of the leadership of the churches and as a powerful influence upon public opinion in the United States.

The Roman Catholic Church did not participate in the social gospel movement in the United States. It did, however, make pronouncements upon social issues and promoted humanitarianism. On May 15, 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclical letter on "The Condi-

⁴¹ Hopkins, *op. cit.*, pp. 316-17.

tion of Labor" in which he dealt so sympathetically with the problems of labor that he became known as the workingman's Pope.⁴² He declared the right of labor to organize, the responsibility of the state to protect the laborer's rights, the concern of all "to save the poor workers from the cruelty of grasping speculators, who use human beings as mere instruments for making money," the conviction that children should not be placed in workshops and factories "until their bodies and minds are sufficiently mature," and the moral obligation of employers to pay fair wages.⁴³ In 1931 Pope Pius XI issued an encyclical letter on "Reconstructing the Social Order" in which he called attention to the benefits to be derived from the application of Christian morality to the economic aspects of modern life.⁴⁴ These social pronouncements are implemented in this country by the National Catholic Welfare Conference which has increased the efficiency of the benevolence and social work of Catholic organizations and has contributed

⁴² Carl Conrad Eckhardt, *The Papacy and World-Affairs as Reflected in the Secularization of Politics* (Chicago, 1937), pp. 251-54.

⁴³ Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII, "The Condition of Labor," Official Translation, pp. 22-24.

⁴⁴ *Sixteen Encyclicals of His Holiness Pope Pius XI, 1926-1937* (Washington, 1937), pp. 3-48.

to the understanding of social problems and the growth of a sense of social justice in American society.

IV

IN SOME RESPECTS the churches are playing a diminishing role as a social force in American life. Many people have elevated science and business to the place formerly held by religion and have seen in them the hope for the future. Professor Ralph Henry Gabriel, who has traced the influence of Christianity in the development of American democratic thought, says that Evangelical Protestantism which tamed the crude and godless frontier, permeated the thought of the nation with a "frank supernaturalism," and provided the most powerful drive behind the humanitarian movements, reached its apogee in the middle decade of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The humanitarianism inspired by the Christian religion softened the animosities created by the Civil War, undertook to ameliorate the sufferings of men, and gave birth to dreams of a better world. However, organized urban Protestantism became closely identified

⁴⁵ Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York, 1940), pp. 33, 14, 161, 13.

with the middle and upper classes. "As the end of the nineteenth century approached, American cities saw a spinescent Protestantism converting its substance into costly and extravagant edifices, material symbols of the ecclesiastical gospel of wealth. A similar phenomenon among the Catholics came later. . . . The naturalism of the laboratory has replaced religion in providing a frame of reference for modern American thought."⁴⁶

The moral latitude in this nation is wide today and, although there is much that is noble and good, American society is far less Christian in its basic presuppositions and structure than at the surface level. The acceptance of family disorganization, intergroup conflict, and economic injustice indicates a lack of moral certainty. During the first third of the twentieth century a higher ratio of church members to population was reached than ever before in American history and the churches are now at their numerical peak. The Catholic population in 1947 exceeded 25,000,000. There are more than 43,000,000 Protestant church members in the United States today, but the increase in church membership was accompanied by a decline in moral discipline and measured by the

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 158, 373. Reprinted by permission of The Ronald Press Company.

standards of the New Testament the average moral level of the churches is unquestionably low.

The major religious bodies in the United States have formulated and publicized social ideals and ethical convictions, but the problem of implementing the ideals and measures approved by the consciences of prophetic individuals has not been solved.

The concern of the churches for social change and social justice has encountered strong opposition. In the first place, American Christians differ in their views of the social responsibilities of organized religion. Some think that the churches should participate as institutions in programs for social betterment and undertake the works of charity, of healing, and of economic and political reform. Others believe that it is the primary function of the churches to preach the Christian ideal and to instruct and inspire men and women who, in their vocations and through the institutions of society, will implement this ideal.

In the second place, the pronouncements on social issues made by church councils and conventions in recent decades have been far in advance of the social thought and the social behavior of the majority of the membership of the churches. One result of this lag is a

widening gulf between the minister who has social passion and moral earnestness and his laity. There is a strong tendency for laymen to approve tranquil preaching which comforts troubled hearts and inspires discouraged spirits and to resent and to condemn prophetic preaching which relates the gospel of Christ to the ethical issues of this generation.⁴⁷

In the third place, the churches have been slow to participate in social planning and to develop techniques of social change. Dr. Howard Odum, who recognizes the influence of the churches in the social life of the South, says, "The church has done little with reference to the tenant and the laborer in the way of programs; the tenant and the laborer have played a small part in the life of the church whose fortunes will fluctuate with the prevailing culture of the region. With all its mighty influence the power of the church has been in its ideologies and conditioning attitudes and not in its program."⁴⁸

And, in the fourth place, there are factors in society and in adult human nature which make it difficult for

⁴⁷ Charles Clayton Morrison, *The Social Gospel and The Christian Cultus* (New York, 1933), pp. 8-24.

⁴⁸ Howard W. Odum, *Southern Regions of the United States* (Chapel Hill, 1936), p. 527. Copyright 1936 by The University of North Carolina Press and reprinted with permission.

the churches to change the social order in the direction of the Kingdom of God on earth. Dr. J. H. Oldham has described these resistances to social change. They include human sin and human finitude; false philosophies of life which dominate the whole temper of an age; men created with small-scale minds whose imagination and interests are restricted; the specialization of modern society by which men are so immersed in a particular task that they have no energy or leisure to think in wider terms; human egoism, pride, and moral weakness; and ill-health, fatigue, and the effects of age with its hardening of the mind.⁴⁹ Liston Pope discovered many evidences that the preachers in Gaston County, North Carolina, have not understood economic and social processes and little evidence that the churches have perceived any integral relation between their gospel message and social reconstruction. His conclusion is: "The churches have tended to pass from a dynamic force for social change to a static sanction of the change effected."⁵⁰

On the other hand, there is impressive evidence that the Christian conscience is a vigorous and powerful

⁴⁹ J. H. Oldham, Visser't Hooft and others, *The Church and Its Function in Society* (Chicago, 1937), pp. 171-72.

⁵⁰ Liston Pope, *Millhands and Preachers* (New Haven, 1942), p. 332.

force in the nation's life. Among the churches there is here and there a recovery of the Christian moral conscience and a clear-sighted recognition of Christian responsibility for the character of social institutions and for the formation of social policy. At least a minority group of persons of determined good will within the churches recognize the necessity of taking the moral initiative. They insist that the chief social task of the churches is the development of a more sensitive social conscience among their own members and then the pronouncement of moral judgment upon the ethical aspects of public policies.

Evidences of the vitality of the Christian tradition and of the Christian conscience in contemporary American life may be seen, first of all, in the renewed emphasis upon the gospel of Christ and its power to remake human nature and human society. An increasing number of social-minded leaders in the churches hold the conviction that the ills of modern life cannot be solved by social legislation alone. The heart, out of which are the issues of life, must be changed. The dynamic of the Christian social movement is ultimately to be found in the Sovereign God who has revealed his character and purpose in Jesus Christ and who wills a new world es-

tablished upon the weightier matters of the law, namely, justice, mercy, and faith. This gospel successfully meets the tests of philosophic adequacy and of social effectiveness.

In the second place, the social thinkers of the churches are subjecting the social strategy of the church to critical examination with a view to modifying it in the direction of wider approval and greater effectiveness. Dr. John Bennett has suggested that the social strategy of the church should include five elements: dedication to the general social goals which grow out of the Christian ideal; the call to repentance for specific social evils; the support of definite next steps apart from partisan politics and apart from specific legislation; more fundamental teaching about the significance of politics, political issues, and the refusal of the church to form a permanent alliance with any political party; and the development of pioneering Christian social movements within the church.⁵¹

In the third place, many American churches today are centering attention, not upon specific social reforms, but upon the development of Christian social attitudes. The teaching agencies of the churches are being used

⁵¹ John C. Bennett, *Social Salvation* (New York, 1935), pp. 121-30.

increasingly to guide the formation of ethical attitudes which are disinterested, which express the individual's own rational judgment, and which are valuable for society.⁵² This kind of instruction produces keener sensitiveness to social need, a deeper social passion, and a stronger desire to promote social welfare.

In the fourth place, the churches have created research agencies within their own organizations to discover social facts, to implement moral precepts, and to find concrete ways in which the churches may attack specific problems. Attempts are made through the research department of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, through the Council for Social Action of the Congregational and Christian Churches, and through other research agencies to give the churches the facts concerning marriage and the family, economic issues, race relations, public policies, and international relations, and to arouse them to Christian social action. Among Southern Baptists there is a new and growing social consciousness. The Social Service Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention studies social issues, subjects the regional culture to a Christian

⁵² Hugh Hartshorne, *Character in Human Relations* (New York, 1939), p. 291.

criticism, and seeks an unassailable factual basis for Christian action.

In the fifth place, some of the most adventurous and strategic social action of recent decades has been inaugurated and carried on by the churches. Specific programs and methods which have been used successfully by some churches to channel their moral and educational influence into fields of human service and social regeneration are described in such books as *The Social Work of the Churches* by F. Ernest Johnson, *Churches in Social Action* and *Religion Lends A Hand* by James Myers, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* by John Bennett, and *Manifesto on Rural Life* issued by the National Catholic Rural Life Conference. The Protestant churches, through their denominational boards of home missions, support a vast enterprise to meet the needs of socially inadequate communities. In rural communities, as well as in urban areas, the churches increase men's knowledge of God, create a redemptive fellowship, and minister to human need.

In recent years the Protestant churches in the United States have entered upon an era of functional solidarity and integration and most of them have programs of social action consonant with the Christian ethic. This develop-

ment is one of the authentic indices of religious vitality in modern life. Dr. W. C. Barclay says that probably four-fifths of the day-by-day work of social amelioration and service in this country is being done by persons who received their original impulse and sustaining inspiration from the teaching of the church.⁵³ In 1935 William Temple said that nine-tenths of the day-to-day drudgery of social and philanthropic work in England was being done by Christians, acting in the inspiration of their Christian faith. He concluded: "There is far less done by Christians than ought to be done; but most of what is done at all is done by Christians."⁵⁴

The strength of American democracy does not reside exclusively in physical resources, scientific skill, and military power. It springs from the religious faith of persons who have learned to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. The democratic aspirations brought to this country by lovers of liberty and wrought out on this continent have moral and religious foundations. To repudiate, or to neglect, the religious basis of democratic

⁵³ Wade Crawford Barclay, *The Church and a Christian Society* (New York, 1939), pp. 46-47.

⁵⁴ William Temple, *The Church and Its Teaching Today* (New York, 1936), p. 48.

association would be culturally inexcusable and spiritually disastrous.

In this country and in England there is new recognition of the spiritual foundations of democracy. What is required is a rebirth of the prophetic spirit in the churches to destroy complacent attitudes towards the social problems confronting democracy, to teach men the ethical meaning of Christianity, and to mitigate the cruelties of the social struggle. Indeed the intellectual content of the Christian message, clearly understood and wisely applied in action, transcends the concept of social struggle, and replaces it with the ideal and practice of active good will and social cooperation. In these epochal years of social change the churches have an opportunity to declare the insights of Christian theology and the demands of Christian morality, to strengthen the spiritual and moral bases of democratic society, and to keep alive the dream of a brotherly world in which all men of good will may find peace and abundant life.

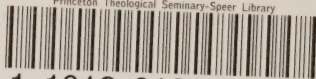
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